

ZIMBABWE JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

VOLUME 22 NUMBER 3

November 2010

ISSN 1013-3445

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The Zimbabwe Journal of Educational Research is published tri-annually by the University of Zimbabwe (UZ), Human Resources Research Centre (HRRC).

ISBN : **1013-3445**

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The Editors of the Zimbabwe Journal of Educational Research wish to express their deep gratitude to the following leading academics who have dedicated their precious time to review the articles which appeared in Volume 22 Numbers 1, 2 and 3 of 2010. We thank them for their up-to-date knowledge of the subjects which they were asked to review.

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The Official Language-In-Education Policy and Its Implementation at Infant School Level in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study focused on underlying reasons for the discrepancy between the official language policy and its implementation at infant school level in Masvingo District, Zimbabwe. A survey design was used. The sample consisted of 152 infant teachers, 25 school heads, 17 teachers-in-charge and three Provincial Education Administrators. Questionnaires and interviews were used to collect data. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics. The study found that participants were generally ignorant about the nature and requirements of the language policy of the 1987 Education Act (amended in 2006). Attitudes were found to be more positive towards English than Shona/ Ndebele as the language of instruction at infant level. Recommendations were made for policy makers to put in place mechanisms for attitude change and to conscientise policy implementers on the interpretation and implementation of the language-in-education policy.

Introduction and Background to the Study

Zimbabwe has experienced language policy changes which can be attributed to the current neglect of mother tongue instruction in the infant grades (Ngara, 1982; Otto, 1997). In pre-independence Zimbabwe, Shona and Ndebele were used as media of instruction in Sub Standard A and B until 1962 when the Judges Commission, which had been tasked to look into the African Education System, recommended that children should learn to read and write in English from the first day of Grade one. As a result of this change in the language policy, new syllabuses were developed as well as new teachers' guides and new textbooks for children. There was orientation of teachers, school managers and education officers through in-service courses (Siyakwazi and Siyakwazi, 1995). This helped to sensitise educationists throughout the country on the proposed changes, which included use of English as the medium of instruction from the beginning.

The English medium policy was maintained until 1980 when Zimbabwe independence brought about a new language policy which raised the status of the mother tongue and recognized the significant role played by the L1 in learning. The post 1980 language policy, which revised erstwhile colonial English medium policy, was enshrined in the Education Act of 1987. The new policy provided that the language of instruction for children from Grade one to three is to be their first language and that they learn English as one of the subjects in the curriculum. From Grade four onwards, English becomes the language of instruction while Shona and Ndebele remain

being offered as subjects. A further amendment to the language-in-education policy was made in 2006 and it states that prior to form one, indigenous languages may be used as the medium of instruction.

By stating that children should be taught in their first language (L1) during the initial years of schooling, it is clear that Zimbabwe sought to enhance the status of local languages for the reason that children learn more easily and faster in their mother language (UNESCO, 1953). Efficient L2 acquisition becomes better after exposure to L1 during initial years of schooling (Sprosty, 1995). The language policy also recognizes the importance of English (L2), which happens to be the language of Government in administration, business and international relations (Gatawa, 1998). By ensuring that children acquire full competence in their L1, their indigenous language and culture can become firmly rooted and such a language policy enables Infant teachers to emphasise the acquisition of oral language which is necessary in reading and writing in English (Sprosty, 1995; Genese, 1977). In spite of the benefits offered by learning in the mother tongue, Infant teachers in Zimbabwe rarely use Shona or Ndebele as a medium of instruction up to Grade three (Gatawa, 1998).

There are several reasons for failure to implement mother tongue instruction policies by African countries. These include inadequate preparation of teachers, insufficient teaching materials, lack of consultation, declaration without implementation, lack of evaluation and attitudes towards indigenous languages and English (L2) (Bamgbose, 1991).

In African countries, language planners are too eager to implement the use of the mother tongue for teaching in primary schools and yet no necessary preparations would have been made before hand (Farrant, 1991). If a language policy is to be successful, teachers need thorough training through in-service courses, seminars, conferences, and workshops (Benaars, Otiende and Biersvert, 1994). Related to preparation of teachers is the issue of material production. Once a policy decision has been made to use an African language as a medium of instruction, teaching and learning materials have to be made available. Serious problems are posed because in some cases, no teaching materials are available in the African language being used (Farrant, 1991).

In declaration without implementation, Bamgbose (1991) suggests that escape clauses may be built into the policy so that policy-makers are not held responsible for non-implementation. A policy may also be declared but no specified mechanisms for implementation such as a language commission are put in place, resulting in a policy which merely remains on paper.

Hawes (1979) holds the view that language policies in Africa are "highly charged political issues" which are not decided entirely on educational

leads to problems of policies that are not trusted and not understood by (some) sections of the community. There is need to get views of people from various sectors of society if implementation of the proposed language policy is to be successful, otherwise the problems caused by lack of consultation may impinge upon the work of personnel whose task is to implement the language policy (Kamwendo, 1997). If progress is to be achieved, periodic review of existing language policies is a necessity. By determining the extent to which the language policy is a success, the language planners would then consider possible solutions in situations where there are problems (Perren, 1968).

The colonial and post-colonial language and educational policies provide a solid basis for the explanation of attitudes towards African languages and English L2 (Saville-Troike, 1982; Bamgbose, 1991; Roy-Campbell, 1996; Adegbija, 1994; Robinson, 1996). The colonial language policies either adopted the use of English from the first grade or only used the indigenous language as a medium of instruction in the lower classes of the primary school while English was used in higher education, science and technology (Robinson, 1996). Bamgbose (1991) observes that the colonial experience continues to shape and define the post-colonial problems and practices and he terms this "an inheritance situation". As education during the colonial period in Africa was equated with learning of a European language, Ngugi waThiong'o, (1986) asserts that this had a negative influence on Africans since the colonial and neo-colonial subjects tend to undermine their own language.

Teachers play a central role in implementing any language policy. Benaars et al (1994) assert that for a language policy to be successful, teachers must be committed to bringing about the desired change. This view is echoed by Ngaru (1977:329) who asserts that:

It does not matter how good and how ideal a language policy is, if teachers are not available to make sure that it is properly implemented, then no amount of planning will yield anything like the results expected by the planners.

In Zimbabwe, Chimhundu (1996), in Gudhlanga (2005) notes that there is a lot of rhetoric on the need to promote African languages and culture, and yet not much is done in practice. Studies conducted by Chivore (1994) and Shumba & Manyati (2000) revealed that Infant teachers use the first language only when children fail to understand concepts which are taught in English. In another study carried out by Dyanda (1997), it was established that children in these infant grades have limited linguistic skills which are necessary in concept development. These studies mainly found that there are linguistic problems which may be attributed to non-implementation of the language policy in Grades one, two and three. The

present study hopes to contribute to the growing body of local research in the field of language-in-education policy implementation (Mnkandla, 2000; Nyawaranda, 2000; Magwa, 2007; Ndamba, 2008).

Purpose of the Study

The study sought to search for underlying reasons for the discrepancy between the official language policy and what infant teachers actually do in the classroom.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following research questions:

- i) What level of awareness do School Heads, Teachers-In Charge and Infant teachers have on the nature and requirements of the language policy?
- ii) What procedures were used by various levels of the education system to change the colonial language policy to the new language policy?
- iii) How do primary School Heads and Teachers-In-Charge of Infant departments monitor implementation of the language policy?
- iv) What are the perceptions and attitudes of teachers and administrators towards instruction in the mother tongue?

Methodology

Design

The research was a descriptive survey that used both questionnaires and interviews to collect quantitative and qualitative data.

Sample

From the list of primary schools for Masvingo District provided at the Provincial Office of Education, the researcher used systematic random sampling by taking every fourth school until they were twenty-eight of them. Out of these, fifteen were rural, seven peripheral urban and six urban schools. The research mainly targeted all qualified infant teachers in these schools, all school heads and all Teachers-In-Charge (TICs) who had administrative posts in the selected schools. One hundred and fifty two (152) Infant teachers, 25 School Heads and 17 TICs participated in the study.

The views of an Education Officer, a Deputy Provincial Education Director and a Provincial Education Director were sought as these were regarded as key province level figures in a position to influence practice in this district.

Instruments

The questionnaire was the major instrument meant to establish facts and opinions which would explain the discrepancy between official language policy and practice by infant teachers in Masvingo District. There were two types of questionnaires, one for the Infant school teachers and another for the School Heads and TICs. Questionnaires were quite appropriate and useful considering that this study consisted of three types of samples and each questionnaire had thirty-five items. Information was thus collected in an economic way in terms of time, effort and cost (Srivastava, 1994). The questionnaire was mainly structured and included one open-ended question at the bottom of structured questions. Masvingo Provincial Education personnel responded to interviews. The researcher administered questionnaires and conducted the interviews personally. A 100% return rate for questionnaires was achieved. The study was conducted in 28 urban, peripheral urban and rural primary schools of Masvingo District of Education.

Data Analysis

Data from the questionnaire was analysed using descriptive statistics involving frequency counts and percentages. The SPSS/PC computer package was used to analyse data from questionnaires for infant teachers, school heads and TICs. Qualitative data consisted of evaluative description of data from Provincial Education Office personnel as well as information on the open ended questions on the questionnaires.

Findings

Table 1: Required language of instruction according to the current language policy.

LANGUAGE	RESPONSES					
	HEADS		TICs		INFANT TEACHERS	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
English	1	4	2	12	27	18
Shona/Ndebele	3	12	2	12	17	11
Both	21	84	13	76	108	71
Total	25	100	17	100	152	100

It is clear from the responses that respondents did not believe the language policy required the L1 to be the medium of instruction as the majority indicated that both English and Shona or Ndebele were to be used in the infant grades.

Table 2: Clarity of the Language Policy.

DESIGNATION	RESPONSES							
	YES		NO		DON'T KNOW		TOTAL	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
School Heads	10	40	13	52	2	8	25	100
TICs	5	29	7	42	5	29	17	100
Infant Teachers	68	45	58	38	26	17	152	100

Results show that the greater percentage of respondents indicated that the language policy was not clear to them on the issue of implementation or that they did not know. Those who said the language policy was clear could have meant their own perception of the language policy (where both the L1 and the L2 were used as media of instruction).

Table 3: Language Policy Workshop History

ITEM	DESIGNATION	RESPONSE					
		YES		NO		TOTAL	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Attendance of Workshops on Interpretation and Implementation of the Current language policy	School Heads	5	20	20	80	25	100
	TICs	1	6	16	94	17	100
	Infant Teachers	10	7	142	93	152	100
	School Heads	15	60	10	40	25	100
	TICs	6	35	1	65	17	100
Implementation of staff Development Programmes on the Language policy							

The majority of the respondents indicated that they had not attended any workshops on the interpretation of the language policy. Those who said they had attended the workshops were required to give dates and venues. It turned out that these workshops were on teaching language in general and not on the language policy issues. Whereas the majority of the School Heads said they held staff development programmes on the language policy, the majority of TICs, who are directly in charge of the infant schools, said they did not hold these workshops as a procedure to sensitise Infant teachers on the requirements of the current language policy. There appears to be a discrepancy between School Heads and TICs on the staff development history. There is the possibility that this discrepancy might be due to staff changes.

Table 4: Awareness about workshops on language policy at national and regional level since 1987.

NUMBER WORKSHOPS	OF	RESPONSES			
		HEADS		TICs	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%
One		2	8	Nil	Nil
Two		2	8	Nil	Nil
More than two		5	20	Nil	Nil
None		Nil	Nil	3	18
Don't know		16	64	14	82
Total		25	100	17	100

Results in table 4 show that if workshops on the language-in-education policy were held at national and regional levels, as a procedure to change the colonial policy to the current language policy, the participants in this study were generally not aware of them.

Findings on what procedures were used by various educational levels to change the colonial language policy to the current one were confirmed by responses made by one Education Officer, a Deputy Provincial Education Director and a Provincial Education Director in an interview with the researcher. The Provincial Education Office personnel revealed that from their own knowledge, no workshops had ever been mounted on the current language-in-education policy.

Table 5: Monitoring the implementation of the language policy by School Heads and TICs

DESIGNATION	RESPONSES					
	YES		NO		TOTAL	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
School Heads	21	84	4	16	25	100
TICs	9	53	8	47	17	100
Infant Teachers	108	71	44	29	152	100

Results show that implementation of the language policy is monitored even though it is likely that Heads and TICs monitor the use of English as the medium of instruction as opposed to the official language policy requirement.

Table 6: School Heads, TICs and Infant Teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards implementation of the language policy

ITEM	DESIGNATION	RESPONSE							
		Agree		Not sure		Disagree		Total	
		F	%	f	%	F	%	f	%
English preferred to shona/Ndebele when teaching	Infant teacher	9 8	64	7	5	47	31	15 2	10 0
Teaching in LI Shona/Ndebele is a waste of time	Head	-	-	-	-	25	10	25	10
	TIC			1	6	16	0	17	0
	Infant teacher	1 4	-	9	6	12 9	94 85	15 2	10 0
Educational standards deteriorate if Shona/Ndebele is used as a medium of instruction in the infant grades	Head	4	16	2	8	19	76	25	10
	TIC	8	47	-	-	9	53	17	0
	Infant teacher	6 1	40	3	2	88	58	15 2	10 0
Teaching in Shona/Ndebele in the infant grades helps children understand concepts better	Head	2	84	-	-	4	16	25	10
	TIC	1	76	-	-	4	24	17	0
	Infant teacher	1 3 1 0 8	71	7	5	37	24	15 2	10 0
Teaching in the LI delays Children's learning of English	Head	1	40	3	12	12	48	25	10
	TIC	0	65	-	-	6	35	17	0
	Infant teacher	1 1 8 8	58	13	9	51	34	15 2	10 0
Tests in the infant grades should be written in English in all subjects except Shona/Ndebee	Head	1	76	1	4	5	20	25	10
	TIC	9	76	-	-	4	24	17	0
	Infant teacher	1 3 1 3 1	86	1	1	20	13	15 2	10 0

[illegible]

The school practice/Head insists on the use of English as a medium of instruction	Head	2	84	-	-	4	16	25	10
	TIC	1	71	1	6	4	24	17	0
	Infant teacher	1	87	5	3	15	10	15	10
		2						2	0
		1							10
		3							0
		2							

F = frequency

The results in table 6 indicate that a greater percentage of infant teachers preferred to teach in English than in Shona/ Ndebele. Although the majority of Infant teachers, School Heads and TICs were generally of the view that children learn better when they are taught in their mother tongue, the same respondents still felt that written tests should be in English instead of Shona/ Ndebele. Results also show that all the three groups of respondents were of the opinion that English should be used as the medium of instruction since it is an international language. Teaching in the mother tongue was viewed as causing delays in children's learning of English and the respondents preferred to introduce reading and writing skills in the L1 and L2 simultaneously. School practice, in particular school heads, insisted on the use of English as the medium of instruction in the infant grades. On a positive note, respondents felt that it was not a waste of time to teach in the mother tongue and that the standards would not deteriorate if Shona/ Ndebele is used as a language of instruction at infant level.

The perceptions of three educational administrators at the Provincial Education Office were sought in an interview with the researcher. These respondents were asked about their views concerning the use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction in the infant grades. All the three were positive towards the use of the L1 in the infant grades. However, these administrators pointed out the need for attitude change particularly with teachers who feel more competent when they teach in English and parents who consider English to be more important than the L1.

Discussion of Findings

The level of Awareness about Requirements of the Language Policy.

The general finding was that these respondents were not aware of the nature and requirements of the language-in-education policy. The study found that Shona/Ndebele was not regarded as a medium of instruction, contrary to the Zimbabwean school language policy. Respondents indicated that the policy required them to use both the L1 and the L2 as the media of instruction at infant level. There are four possible explanations for the discrepancy

between the official language policy and the respondents' knowledge of the required language of instruction. The first could possibly be that there was no teacher preparation for the new policy. It could also be explained in terms of lack of evaluation of the policy, lack of consultation and finally the attitudes of School Heads, TICs and Infant teachers.

The first possible reason why School Heads, TICs and Infant teachers were not aware of the nature and requirements of the language policy could be that the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture had not prepared them for the implementation of the language policy at its inception in 1987. The colonial policy had been successful because of preparation of Infant teachers, Education officers and lecturers from teachers' colleges on the use of English from the first day of school, and materials which included new syllabuses and textbooks were produced to sensitise implementers of the policy (Siyakwazi and Siyakwazi, 1995). Why the current language policy is not clear to School Heads, TICs and Infant teachers may therefore possibly be attributed to the fact that these respondents actually do not know what the policy is. There is a possibility that because some School Heads, TICs and Infant teachers are not aware of the change of policy, they may believe that the colonial policy is still in existence and hence continue to implement the old policy.

That respondents were not aware of the requirements of the language policy could also be attributed to the fact that School Heads, TICs and Infant teachers might not have been initially involved or even consulted on the proposed language policy, yet they play a central role in the implementation of any language policy (Benaars et al, 1994).

Another possible explanation for lack of knowledge concerning the nature and requirements of the current language-in-education policy is that although the policy has been revisited several times (Circular Number 1 and 3 of 2002; Education Amendment Act of 2006; Director's Circular Number 26 of 2007), evaluation in terms of what happens in the classroom situation may not have been done. If the policy had been evaluated, education authorities could have noted its problems and School Heads, Infant teachers and TICs would have been made aware of the nature and requirements of the language policy, so that they would implement the correct policy (Magwa, 2007).

A further explanation is that the attitudes of School Heads, TICs and Infant teachers could possibly contribute towards why they believe that English should be mainly used as the medium of instruction and the LI only used when necessary to explain concepts. As indicated by their positive evaluation of English, respondents seem to be convinced that English should be used from the first grade because of its instrumental value (Adegbija, 1994; Otto, 1997).

Procedures used by various levels of the education system to change the colonial language policy to the new language policy of the 1987 Education Act.

The general finding was that School Heads, TICs and Infant teachers were not aware of any procedures to sensitise them about the new language policy. Whereas participants said they did not attend workshops on the interpretation and implementation of the language policy, this was confirmed by Provincial Education Office officials who said that to the best of their knowledge, no workshops on the language policy were ever held since 1987.

Why the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture may not have held workshops could probably be that the government is not committed to the policy since there is no clear statement on whose responsibility it is to enforce the language policy. In the absence of specified mechanisms for implementation, the result may be a policy which merely remains on paper (Bamgbose, 1991). When the responsible agency is not there to put procedures in place for sensitising teachers, it amounts to declaration of policy without implementation. Policy implementers tend to remain in the dark as regards the nature and requirements of the language policy if no effort is made to change from the colonial language policy to the new language policy (Shumba & Manyati, 2000; Brock-Utne 2005b in Brock-Utne & Skattum, 2009).

Another possible explanation for not holding workshops at national and regional levels could be that the policy itself contains an "escape" clause. An "escape" clause is one which is built into the policy so that policy makers are not held responsible for non-implementation (Bamgbose, 1991). This is evident in the statement on the language policy that either English or Shona/Ndebele "may be used as the medium of instruction, depending upon which language is more commonly spoken and better understood by the pupils". The use of "may", in the writer's opinion, is not forceful enough to compel the education system to enforce the implementation of the language policy, hence the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture may not feel obliged to put in place procedures to change from the colonial language policy to the current one (Mnkandla, 2000).

The attitudes of policy makers may also possibly explain why there were insufficient procedures to sensitise teachers on the current language policy. Policy makers may pay lip service to the language policy if they believe in the supremacy of English as compared to the mother tongue as the medium of instruction in the lower grades. This may possibly lead to neglect of implementation procedures being put in place (Chimhundu, 1993 in Magwa, 2007; Prah, 2002 in Brock-Utne & Skattum, 2009).

Lack of funds may be another reason for not mounting seminars, in-service courses or other procedures necessary for sensitising teachers on the required language policy. As indicated by Provincial Education Office personnel that there was no proper monitoring of the implementation of the language policy due to lack of funds for supervision purposes, there is a possibility that the government might not have funds available for mounting workshops on the interpretation and implementation of the current language policy.

How Primary School Heads and TICs monitor implementation of the language policy

The study found that school administrators monitor the implementation of the language policy. However, the monitoring that is done is on the implementation of the colonial policy, since the general finding was that respondents were not aware of the nature and requirements of the current language policy.

School Heads and TICs seem to monitor implementation of the colonial language policy possibly because of their attitudes which favour English as the medium of instruction than the L1, as indicated by the study's findings. School Heads and TICs with a negative attitude towards the use of the L1 in learning cannot effectively monitor implementation of a mother tongue policy (Ngara, 1977).

Lack of awareness on the nature and requirements of the correct language policy could possibly be another explanation why School Heads and TICs continue to monitor the use of English as the medium of instruction in the infant grades. If, as indicated by the study's findings that they are not aware of the policy, there appears to be no way that they can supervise the implementation of a policy which they are not fully aware of, hence they would monitor the colonial language policy.

Attitudes of School Heads, TICs and Infant teachers towards instruction in the mother tongue

Generally the study found that perceptions and attitudes were negative, indicating that respondents were mainly in favour of the use of English as the language of instruction in the infant grades.

There is a possibility that teachers had a negative attitude towards the L1 because of a belief by most teachers that the L1 negatively affects the acquisition of the L2. Authorities like Travers et al (1993), Dulay et al (1982) and Borich & Tombari (1997) argue that such teachers who are of the opinion that the L1 has negative effects on the L2 tend to develop negative attitudes towards the L1.

Negative attitudes towards the L1 can also be explained in terms of the belief by teachers that children would not have enough time to learn English if they are taught through the mother tongue from the first grade, as indicated by the study's findings. Such attitudes are consistent with findings by Rwambiwa (1993) where teachers felt that teaching the L1 slows down the rate at which children learn English. A further explanation for the belief that children should not be taught in the L1 in order to acquire more English could be attributed to the logic of the colonial language policy where it was felt that the earlier children learn in English the better, hence English was introduced as the medium of instruction from the first day of school.

The study found that Infant teachers preferred English to Shona or Ndebele when teaching and this seems to indicate that Infant teachers have a more positive attitude towards English than the L1. Such an attitude can possibly be explained in terms of the belief by most teachers that English is more important than the L1 with regards to its functions in education, whereas the mother tongue is regarded as less important as it is only used as the language of instruction in the lower grades of the primary school (Rwambiwa, 1996; Gatawa, 1998; Magwa, 2007).

The nature of the language-in-education policy may possibly be responsible for the negative attitudes towards the L1 since one of the study's findings was that teachers seemed to believe that as children will eventually learn in English, they might as well start learning in English from Grade one. That the L1 is only used as the medium of instruction in the lower grades was found to be possibly contributory towards negative attitudes by colonial and post-colonial subjects who seem to belittle indigenous languages because they are not used in higher education, science and technology (Adegbiya, 1994; Robinson, 1996; Bamgbose, 1991; Otto, 1997; Ndamba, 2008). Teachers' choice of the language of instruction may therefore be said to be guided by their positive attitudes towards that language. This was evident in the study's findings that teachers wanted children to write tests in English despite the facts provided by the same respondents that children understand concepts better in the L1.

It was, however, encouraging to find out that respondents felt that teaching in the L1 was not a waste of time, and that standards would not deteriorate when Shona or Ndebele is used as the medium of instruction in the infant grades. This, in a way indicates that besides opting for English because of its instrumental benefits, respondents have love for Shona/ Ndebele. This more positive attitude could be explained in terms of facts indicated in the findings that teachers are aware that children understand concepts better when they are taught in the mother tongue (Shumba & Manyati, 2000).

mother tongue as the medium of instruction since the findings of the study indicated that School Heads, TICs and Infant teachers were not aware of the educational benefits of using the L1 as the medium of instruction during the initial years of the child's schooling.

- For effective implementation of the language policy, teachers' colleges and universities offering teacher training for primary education need to support the language policy more than is currently the case. This can be done by sensitising student teachers on the advantages of using the L1 as the medium of instruction in the infant grades.
- There is great need for attitude change at all levels of the education system since English is favoured more than the L1 as the medium of instruction at infant level. This should be done through real campaigns to educate people on the rationale for using the L1 in learning at infant level.
- Policy makers, who appear to be paying lip service to the language-in-education policy, need to ensure that real monitoring of the correct language policy is taking place. The government, through the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture, should enforce the implementation of the language policy by making funds available so that Education Officers can supervise implementation of the correct language policy.

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